

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

by
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CHARACTERS (2M)

Jim Age 35, James's father
James Age 15 going on 16, Jim's son

SETTING

September, 1950. Open back porch of a small house, early evening. Two outdoor chairs (or a glider or porch swing). Small table. Screen door into the house.

NOTES

/ indicates a point where the next line of dialogue breaks in.

Square brackets indicate words that are understood but not spoken.

Words in quotation marks should not be underscored with "air quotes." They weren't a thing in the 1950's.

SYNOPSIS

In 1950, a pleasant father-son evening of window shopping for cars turns serious when the son mentions his best friend is considering suicide. The friend is being bullied at school because he's thought to be "queer." This triggers a painful memory from the father's days in the army in World War II. Their conversation results in mutual revelations that change their relationship going forward.

WARNING

A suicide is discussed but not enacted.

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

Lights up at a level to suggest outdoors on an early September evening, 1950. The back porch of a modest house. A screen door. Two outdoor chairs (or a glider or a porch swing) with an appropriate table to set drinks on. JIM and JAMES enter from having taken a walk around town.

JIM

Go ahead and sit down. I'll get us a couple of beers.

JAMES (tired of the running joke)

Dad!

JIM

Okay. Root beer for you, real beer for me. One of these days, though. When your mother isn't looking.

JAMES

I promised Topher I'd call him tonight.

JIM

That can wait, can't it? There's a couple of things I need to talk to you about.

JAMES

(a bit anxious, he looks at his watch)

I guess.

JIM

Great. Be right back.

JIM exits into the house. JAMES paces. He looks at his watch another time or two. He'll continue to do that as the play goes on. JIM may or may not notice. JIM returns carrying a beer and a root beer (ideally representing brands appropriate to the era).

JIM

Here you go.

JIM hands JAMES the root beer. They both sit. JAMES's posture is not what his father might have called "manly." Perhaps his legs are crossed at the knee or one ankle is under the opposite knee.

JIM

Your call to Topher was gonna have to wait anyway. Your mother's on the phone with her sister and it sounded like they were just getting wound up

JAMES

Damn.

JIM

Watch your language. I heard enough four-letter words in the army. I don't need to hear them in my own house. And I better never hear you say them in front of your mother. You understand me?

JAMES

Yes sir. Sorry.

JIM

Sure you don't wanna try my beer?

JAMES

You gave me sips before. Tastes like kerosene.

JIM

You'll get used to it. And who knows? It might put some hair on your chest.

JAMES

I have hair on my chest.

JIM

Really?

JAMES

Six last time I counted.

JIM exchanges his beer for JAMES's root beer.

JIM

Then here you go. Today my son Jimmy is a man.

JAMES grimaces.

JAMES

What is this? Some kind of initiation?

JIM

Passed down from father to son since time immemorial.

JAMES

Okay. If you insist, I'll try to drink it. On one condition.

DAD

Which is?

JAMES

Could you and Mom stop calling me Jimmy?

DAD

Wow. Would you prefer Jim Junior?

JAMES

Jim's what everybody calls you, and Junior makes me still sound like a kid. I was thinking "James."

JIM

That'll take some getting used to. But sure. We'll try. I will anyway. James.

JAMES

Thanks.

JIM points at the beer.

JIM

We have a deal?

JAMES gingerly takes a sip. It's as bad as he remembers.

JAMES

Yep. Pure kerosene. *(He checks his watch.)* You think Mom's off the phone yet?

JIM

You've gotta be kidding. They'll be in there yacking for at least an hour.

JAMES almost says the forbidden word again.

JAMES

D--- Darn.

JIM

That's better. ... It was nice getting to spend some time with you tonight.

JAMES

Yeah.

JIM

My dad and I used to do the same thing. Every September after the new car models came out.

JAMES (affectionately)

Yeah. You told me. Just like you told me last year and the year before that.

JIM

After supper we'd walk around from dealership to dealership looking through the showroom windows. Comparing the new designs and the latest colors. Not that it made any difference. Didn't matter what the new Packards or Hudsons or anything else looked like. If Dad was gonna get a new car, it was always gonna be a Ford. When I got our first car in nineteen forty, I almost got a Chevy just to irritate him. But of course I didn't. The Depression wasn't quite over yet but I managed to put enough money aside for a used 1937 Ford Deluxe. You remember it?

JAMES

I should. That was what Mom and I rode around in all through the war while you were off fighting Hitler. At least when she could get enough gas ration stamps.

JIM

Thank God her father was a good enough shirttail mechanic to keep it going 'til the war was over and they started making cars again. Traded what was left of it for a brand new 1946 Ford Super Deluxe Station Wagon.

JAMES

All they need to do is say a car's "deluxe" and you'll buy it.

JIM

It was a great family car. And speaking of new cars. The ones we saw tonight. Which was your favorite?

JAMES

I don't know. Why?

JIM

You'll be sixteen next month. Your mother and I talked about it and we thought instead of getting us a new car this year, we might hit for a car for you.

JAMES

Are you kidding me?!

JIM

You'll need to get a job after school to pay for the gas. At twenty-two cents a gallon I can't afford to be paying for you to cruise up and down Main Street every Saturday night. But yeah. You're a good kid, I mean young "adult," and we think you can handle the responsibility. So. Which was your favorite?

JAMES

Well, I kind of liked that new Studebaker Commander.

JIM (aghast)

A Studebaker!?

JAMES

It's totally aerodynamic. It looks like something out of those old space movies--Buck Rogers in the Twenty-Fifth Century.

JIM

But it's so small. There's hardly any room. Especially in the back seat. And once you start dating there'll be times a roomy back seat comes in real handy. You'll see.

JAMES (appalled)

Dad! ... I haven't even thought about dating yet.

JIM

Yeah, well. If you were driving that snazzy red Ford Custom *DeLuxe* Convertible we saw in the showroom there'd be a lot of girls wanting you to start thinking about dating.

JAMES is getting really uncomfortable.

JIM (cont'd)

And 'til then you'll be wanting to haul your friends around. Yeah. That custom Ford's just what you want. A car the guys'll wanna ride in, and the girls'll wanna be *seen* riding in. And trust me. No girl wants to be seen in a Studebaker.

JAMES

You know I haven't got a bunch of friends to hang around with. Just ...

JIM

Just Topher Wilson.

JAMES

Yeah.

JIM

(Pause) About Topher.

JAMES

What?

JIM

Your mother and I think maybe ... maybe you shouldn't be seeing him so much.

JAMES

He's my best friend. ... He's my only friend.

JIM

We just think maybe he's not the best influence.

JAMES

Why?

JIM

Look. I understand what it means to be close to another guy. I do. When you're in the army in wartime and you're sharing a pup tent or a foxhole, and every hour could be your last, it was easy for some guys to get real attached to each other. Like me and Joey.

JAMES

"Joey Moretti from Jersey. The funniest guy you ever met."

JIM

We were side by side twenty-four hours a day for almost two years, taking everything the Germans could throw at us, keeping each other alive. Not ashamed to say it. I loved the guy. Like a brother. More maybe. But there's a problem if people start to suspect two guys might be getting to be a little more than just buddies. *(Beat.)* You understand what I'm saying?

JAMES

You think me and Topher are queer.

JIM

That's not a word we use in this house.

JAMES

How 'bout fairy? Or why not just cut right to faggot?

DAD

Stop with the locker-room language. That's not how you were raised.

JAMES

Locker-room language? It's also hallway language and cafeteria language and rest room language. Everywhere in school language. You can't escape it.

JAMES

That doesn't mean *you* have to use it. But, yeah. We think Topher might be that way. I mean, look at how he stands, and walks, and waves his hands all over the place when he's talking. And the way he sits.

As JIM continues, JAMES self-consciously adopts a more "manly" position, leg crossed ankle over knee or just "man spreading."

JIM (cont'd)

Your mother and I are just concerned that if you're with him all the time, people might start to wonder about *you*. You know, guilt by association.

JAMES

Topher's been my friend since kindergarten and right now he needs somebody willing to be *his* friend. Everybody at school thinks like you do, that he's "that way."

JIM

Is he?

JAMES

Even if he is, he doesn't do anything to deserve getting beat up on a regular basis. He's scared to even go to the bathroom by himself. I can't be with him every minute.

JIM

His parents ought to do something. Maybe at least talk to the principal or the other kids' parents.

JAMES

None of the teachers give a ... darn. His dad just tells him to fight back. Stand up and be a man.

JIM

Probably the same thing I would've told you.

JAMES

Every day it gets worse. He got attacked in the shower after phys ed last week. Coaches had to know what was going on but nobody came to stop it. Topher won't talk about it, so I wouldn't know for sure what happened. Except the next day one of the guys says to me in the hall, man, your boyfriend's sure got a nice tight ass, don't he?

JIM

That's what he called Topher? Your BOYFRIEND? That's what I was *warning* you about. Guilt by/[association]

JAMES

/Dad. Listen to me. Topher told me not to say anything to anybody, but, Jesus, Dad/

JIM

Let's not be taking the Lord's name in vain/

JAMES

Sorry. But he's talking about killing himself just to get it over with. I spent two hours yesterday trying to talk him out of it. And you know what, I don't know if I succeeded.

JIM

All right. Let's think about this. Even if he said not to, shouldn't you say something to his folks? Tell them what's going on?

JAMES

They aren't gonna talk to me. You and Mom think Topher's a bad influence? Well, *his* parents think *I'm* the bad influence. Yeah. (*He checks his watch and stands up.*) I told him I'd call him tonight. I just hope to God he answers the phone.

JAMES gets up and moves toward the screen door.
JIM stops him.

JIM

You might as well sit back down. Your mother's probably still got the phone tied up.

JAMES reluctantly sits.

JAMES

Damn it, Dad. Sorry, but/

JIM

/You know who Topher reminds me of?

JAMES (impatiently)

Who?

JIM

Russell Simpkins. We called him Rusty cause he had a bright red head of hair. He joined our unit late in the war. By that time we needed manpower so bad they were taking almost anybody as long as they could hold a gun. Which Rusty barely could. How he ever made it through boot camp I'll never know. The guys gave him a real hard time. Name calling. Cruel pranks.

JAMES

Sounds familiar.

JIM

They'd beat him up, too. Knocked out a couple of his teeth. The officers looked the other way. Just like your teachers. One night when he was on guard duty. Outside the camp. By himself. We heard a shot. ... I was the one that found him. If it wasn't for the red hair, I wouldn't have recognized him. Of all the horrible things I saw during that war, that's what I'll remember till my dying day. I've never been able to talk about it. Not even with your mother.

JAMES

Then why are you/ [telling me now?]

JIM

/The *official* story, the one they told his folks back home, was Rusty was killed by a German sniper. ... But the shot came from his own gun. He put the barrel of his rifle in his mouth and somehow managed to pull the trigger.

JAMES

Jesus!

JIM gives him an admonishing look but continues.

JIM

Thing is. Rusty wasn't just some guy in my unit. He was my tentmate after Joey got himself wounded and evacuated to a military hospital. Joey knocked me away from a live grenade. He saved my life but he lost one of his legs when it went off. I was devastated.

JAMES (himself devastated)

I'm so sorry. I don't know what else to say.

JIM

So with Joey gone the other half of my tent was the only space available when Rusty got assigned to us. It's amazing how different two people could be. Joey wore his heart on his sleeve so I always knew what he was feeling. Rusty hardly ever said a word. He was going through hell—and not just the same hell we were all going through—but he kept it all bottled up inside. Except at night sometimes I could hear him crying in the dark. I wanted to do something to help, but I was too scared. If I tried too hard to protect him, the other guys might have started to wonder about me. Whether I was taking advantage of having a guy like him sleeping next to me.

JAMES

Guilt by association. That's horrible.

JIM

I was too much of a coward so I stood by while the rest of them went at him 'til he broke. ... C'mon. Let's get in the car.

They both stand up.

JAMES

I told you, I/ have to [call Topher]

JIM

/A phone call isn't good enough. I'll drive you over to Topher's. Maybe I can run interference with his folks while you check on him. If you were planning to do away with yourself, I'd sure as hell want somebody to tell me. So one way or another I'll make his parents listen to me while I try to warn them how close they are to losing their son.

JAMES

You'll do that for Topher?

JIM

Jimmy. (*He corrects himself.*) James. You're my son ... and Topher's your ... friend. But I'm doing it for Rusty, too. This time I'm not gonna keep my mouth shut while another life gets wasted. Not again. I don't know if I can make a difference, but I'll try.

JAMES embraces JIM. After a moment JIM returns the hug. Then gently breaks it.

JAMES

Dad. I love Topher.

JIM

Like a brother.

JAMES

(Pause.) More maybe.

JIM

... You mean ...

JAMES

Yeah.

JIM *(floundering)*

Wow. ... God dammit, I never expected that. Not in a million years. ... A father never imagines his own son— ... Are you sure? ... I mean ... maybe it's just some phase you're going through. Yeah. That happens with some guys, right? They do a little experimenting when they're young and then the right girl comes along and everything gets back to ... to ...

JAMES

Normal?

JIM

Yeah. Normal. So let's just wait and see how it plays out. Meanwhile don't say anything to your mother. I don't know what her reaction might be.

JAMES

Yes you do.

JIM

So I'd rather put off that conversation as long as humanly possible. But maybe some time when both of us are ready, maybe you and I can talk some more. See what our options are.

JAMES

What options?

JIM

I don't know, okay? We need to figure that out.

JAMES

Maybe we can talk over a couple of beers? Man to man?

JIM

Maybe a whole six pack. But yeah. Man to man. ... C'mon. Right now Topher needs you. Rusty might still be alive if somebody ever showed him they cared if he lived or died. So you tell Topher how you feel about him if he doesn't know it already.

JAMES

You mean tell him I love him?

JIM

(Beat.) Just make sure he knows you'll always have his back. ... And give him something to look forward to. Maybe tell him how much fun you're both gonna have, riding around in your brand new, *deluxe,*

(He can't believe he's actually going to say this:)

Studebaker.

JIM puts his arm across JAMES's shoulders as they exit together.

END OF PLAY